

Epicurus Background: 341-271BC

- Born in 341 BC on Samos, the island of Pythagoras and Melissus.
- Was influenced by Democritus (the atomist)
- Moved to Athens in 307 BC
- Because his friends and students gathered in the garden of his house, his school became known as “The Garden”.
- He was an empiricist of sorts. As such, he thought that pleasure was the ultimate good.
- But it is not the *drink-as-much-as-you-can* kind of pleasure, but more like *enjoying-a-fine-glass-of-wine* kind.
- Ultimately, philosophizing with friends is the best kind of life.

Atoms and Void

‘Atom’ literally means “uncuttable”

Epicurus argues that all that exists are atoms (bodies) and void.

“the totality is [made up of] [bodies and void]; for in all cases sense-perception that we must infer by reasoning what is non-evident, as I already said. And if there did not exist that which we call void and space and intangible nature, bodies would not have any place to be in or move through, as they obviously do move. Beyond these two things [viz., bodies and void] nothing can be conceived, either by a comprehensive grasp or analogously to things so grasped, [at least not if we mean] grasped as complete natures rather than as what we termed properties or accidents of these [two] things.” (*Letter to Herodotus*, pg 353-354)


Atoms and Void

“Further, among bodies, some are compounds, and some are those things from which compounds have been made. And these are atomic and unchangeable, if indeed they are not all going to be destroyed into not being but will remain firmly during the dissolutions of compounds, being full by nature and not being subject to dissolution in any way or fashion. Consequently, the principles of bodies must be atomic natures.” (pg. 354)

“...the totality is unlimited.... For if the void were unlimited and bodies limited, bodies would not come to a standstill anywhere but would move in scattered fashion throughout the unlimited void, since they would lack anything to support them or check them by collision. But if the void were limited, the unlimited bodies would not have a place to be in.” (pg. 354)

The Freewill Question

- Epicurus is perhaps the first to recognize the Freewill Question: Does an agent have freewill if all actions are determined by fate (or by necessity)?
- Epicurus concern: if it has been necessary all along that we should act according to fate, actions cannot be up to us (or in our power), with the result that we would not be morally responsible for our actions.
- He saw that Democritean atomism is vulnerable to such a challenge, since it made all phenomena, including human behavior, fully accountable in terms of rigid physical laws of atomic motion, and hence necessary.
- Democritus: atomism → determinism → agents not autonomous → no moral responsibility.
- Stoics: Fate determines everything → but “assent” is in our power → so agents’ actions are still “in our power” → agents are morally responsible for actions.



Epicurus saw that Democritean atomism is vulnerable to the criticism that agents have no autonomy, since it made all phenomena, including human behavior, fully accountable in terms of rigid physical laws of atomic motion, and hence necessary.

It may be that Democritus accepted this consequence, but Epicurus was not willing to because our experience shows that we are autonomous beings.

So, Epicurus wants to accommodate in his theory BOTH atomism AND human freewill.

How does he do this?



The Swerve

Epicurus modifies Democritean atomism

“But Epicurus thinks that the necessity of fate can be avoided by the swerve of an atom. And so a third kind of motion appears, in addition to weight and collision, when an atom swerves by a minimal interval (he calls it an *elachiston* [smallest])...

Epicurus introduced this line of reasoning because he was afraid that if an atom always moved by its natural and necessary heaviness, we would have no freedom, since our mind would be moved in such a way that it would be compelled by the motion of atoms. Democritus, the founder of atomism, preferred to accept that all things happened by necessity than to tear from the atomic bodies their natural motions.” (pg. 381-2)



Psychological level

- We experience freewill
- The indeterminacy from the swerve at the micro level is supposed to give theoretical room at both the macro and psychological levels for agents to act freely.

Macro level

- Atoms form compounds (bodies)
- We can observe behavior of bodies at this level

Micro level

- Atoms and Void
- Atoms move downwards, collide and swerve
- The swerve brings something indeterminate to a strict physical atomic theory

Is the Swerve Enough?

It seems that all that the swerve can do in Epicurus' system is to deny determinism by introducing an indeterminate movement by atoms. But it seems difficult to derive human autonomy from a swerve at the microscopic level.

There is an alternate interpretation...(that you're not responsible to know)